

## Rituals and Relationships

Merry Christmas! It is day seven of the twelve days of Christmas.

Why shortchange yourself when presented with a chance to feast?

Some people have already grown weary of the decorations while others were raised to recognize New Year's Day as the end of the "holiday season." How did you celebrate? Were your celebrations different this year? What rituals did you have that surrounded your celebrations? I would venture to say that these may have changed as we have grown older or grandchildren have been involved. Let's take a moment to reflect on how our celebrations contained rituals. Now, according to your comfort level, I invite you to turn and share with a neighbor, friend, or relative. It is ok to get up and move.

At Southwick Congregational Church and First Congregational Church of Westfield, we also have our rituals. We have had to bend or even suspend some during the pandemic and we have had some difficulty in coming back from them. If we thought people used to get

sick during and right after the holidays, Covid and RSV have brought this to a whole new level. However, we have our rituals of bringing in the New Year with bells (go ahead and ring), how we celebrate Maundy Thursday and Easter, having the New England Brass come just before Christmas, and hopefully, how we bless our Creche at the beginning of Advent. We came together last Sunday and had beautiful intergenerational pageant that involved people from both churches as well as strangers who came off the street to participate. We just ritually celebrated Christmas Eve with candlelight services in both churches.

Particularly as New Englanders, rituals are important. The importance of rituals stems from our desire “to know.” We are quite comfortable in celebrating things in a manner with which we are familiar. At home, in school, at work—we have numerous things that have become “like” rituals to us as they bring us comfort and a sense of order.

In our two churches, we also have the rituals of Baptism and Communion as the two Sacraments we celebrate. We have other things like “New Member Sunday” or Confirmation that have taken on rituals

of their own. I am sure you can think of many different practices that have become rituals or traditions.

In our Gospel reading today, the baby, Jesus, has arrived in the temple with his parents. You see, there were a series of commands relating to ceremonial purity in Mosaic law. The Jewish faith of Mary and Joseph has compelled them to journey to the temple to observe this cleansing ritual that is required of the mother forty days after giving birth as well as making an offering. There were all kinds of rituals that surrounded birth, cycles,

Rituals often serve as a sort of touchstone in our lives. They offer us a chance to connect or to reconnect with God or with loved ones or with an important part of ourselves. And the people present at the ritual matter, too. Simeon and Anna are two of the spiritual “elders” if you will, who are in the temple when Mary and Joseph come to Jerusalem for the purification ritual and for the dedication of Jesus to the Lord. They add their special insights and blessings to the occasion and that imbues the event with even deeper meaning.

Simeon and Anna, not related as far as we can tell, lived their lives devoted to prayer and the rituals of the temple. Simeon prayed to live long enough to see the Messiah. His own ritualistic prayer recognizes the infant Jesus as the Messiah as he utters what Scripture scholars refer to as Nunc dimittis (now let us depart) or the Canticle of Simeon:

“Lord, now you let your servant go in peace; your word has been fulfilled: my own eyes have seen the salvation which you have prepared in the sight of every people: a light to reveal you to the nations and the glory of your people Israel.”

As we enter the New Year with all of its revelry and ritual, my prayer is that we can develop our own spiritual rituals that allow us to build our relationship with our church communities as well as God. Rites and rituals, like the one we observe in the passage for today, add the richness and depth of relationship we all desire with one another and with God. Let us go forth to ring in the New Year and celebrate God with us!